

FEATURES

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This 'Jester' is no joke

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The Jester (弄臣), a new Beijing opera production by Vivien Ku (辜懷群) and Li Baochun (李寶春) that had its world premiere at Novel Hall (新舞台) on Friday, is proof that a little humor will go a very long way. The success of this production is due not only to a strong story, for which credit goes largely to Victor Hugo (because *The Jester* is an adaptation of *Rigoletto*, which lifted its plot from Hugo's *Le Roi S'Amuse*), but to the fact that it has not forgotten that Beijing opera was always intended to be a spectacular entertainment.

Entertainment is the key, and *The Jester*, while never losing sight of its serious subtext and subtle ironies, manages to be hugely enjoyable. Instead of trying laboriously to impress the audience with its artistic boldness, it delights with its virtuosity. This in no way diminishes what it has achieved in responding to the insistent demand for change and innovation within the traditional arts. It is innovation built on virtuosity rather than innovation instead of virtuosity, and the addition of *La Donna e Mobile* inserted into the otherwise largely traditional score are delightful little jokes rather than intrusive devices to show off the producers' avant-garde credentials.

Li, who plays the main role of Rigoletto, also directed and contributed enormously to the writing of the script, and his grounding as a performer shines through, lifting the whole production. During the first act, in his role as the court fool, he performs a number of slight-of-hand magic tricks — changing a scarf into a staff and pulling a songbird in a cage out of his sleeve. The tricks themselves are unexceptional by the standards of modern magic, but the fact that Li is able to perform them while singing a highly entertaining aria and interacting with other characters on stage drew gasps of delight from the audience. The use of Verdi's well-known music was also introduced lightly and served both as a running joke and marked a moment of terrible revelation for the title character. It is always nice to see resources such as these sparingly used, but when used, exploited to their full.

But quite apart from these musical jokes and stage business, there was the solid foundation of Beijing opera talent, and the fact that the cast was allowed to do what they do best. There were plenty of virtuoso arias by Li and Chao Chun (趙群), who plays Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter, and plenty of traditional comic business by Huang Yu-lin (黃宇琳), who mixes singing, cross-talk and broad comedy superbly for several roles, including Giovanna.

Applause and bravos started only minutes into the first act, a response that was a stark contrast to the ponderous silence and dutiful clapping that marked some recent fusion productions. People walked away at the end having been lifted up by the skill of the performance rather than being weighed down by its burden of innovation.

On the other side of town at the National Experimental Theater, New Idea Theater Festival (新點子劇展) opened with the first of three productions that seek to combine the beauty of traditional opera with the exploration of contemporary issues. The opening production featured the Taiwan Bangzi Company (台灣豫劇團) in coordination with director Fu Hung-cheng (符宏征). There was much that was good about the production, though it must be said that the quality was most evident when the traditional performers were allowed to get on with it. For the rest, *Liou Chiang-ti's Hell* (劉青提的地獄) simply had too much of everything. Not content to find inspiration from one traditional opera, subplots from two others where brought in. To give it a contemporary edge, scenes of the modern mundane were also brought in. Then there were smoke machines working overtime, tumbling devils from hell in acrobatic and comic sequences, and a television soundtrack competing with a traditional ensemble. Some of the devices where startlingly fresh, while others were rather cliched, but crucially, for all the quality ingredients that went in, the mixture never really bonded. The second production in the series is *The Drought Goddess* (大神魘) by the Ethan Chen Production House (野墨坊) and runs from Dec. 19 through Dec. 21, followed by *Li Ling, the Abandoned Hero* (李世英雄 — 李慶) by 1/2Q Theater, which plays from Dec. 25 through Dec. 28. Tickets for all productions are NT\$500 and are available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.



Chao Chun, who plays Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter, puts in a powerful performance in *The Jester*. PHOTO COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL



Gustavo Dudamel teaches children at Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's effort to establish youth orchestras in underserved areas of the city. PHOTO: REUTERS

Hangin' with Beethoven

Young maestro Gustavo Dudamel will soon become director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, but he is equally enthusiastic about another project — creating orchestras for underprivileged children

BY MARY MILLIKEN
REUTERS, LOS ANGELES

As Gustavo Dudamel tried to coax more force from children playing Beethoven, the young Venezuelan conductor resorted to an original tool: his hair. "Do you remember the hair movement? It is very important!" Dudamel told the kids from rough South Los Angeles, his head of thick, springy curls bobbing to make the point.

Who knew a classical music rehearsal could be so much fun?

Well, anyone who has worked with the 27-year-old Dudamel. He is the toast of the classical music world and is preparing to take over one of the world's top orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in 2009. A big part of his new job will be working with inner-city youth.

With Dudamel, the Los Angeles Philharmonic not only gets a highly acclaimed conductor. It also gets the experience of someone raised in *El Sistema* — Venezuela's much lauded music school network that has helped thousands of children steer clear of violence and drugs in underprivileged neighborhoods.

As the Los Angeles Philharmonic began to court Dudamel two years ago, President Deborah Borda went to Venezuela to study *El Sistema* and see how it could be applied in the second largest US city, a place of great wealth and also rampant gang violence.

Even though *El Sistema* now has 300,000 children in its schools, Borda said she was encouraged to start small. The Los Angeles Philharmonic plans to create three to five youth orchestras under Dudamel's tutelage.

The maiden project, the EXPO Center Youth Orchestra, met him last weekend for the first time. The mostly African American and Hispanic children have signed a contract to take care of their free instruments, practice, and attend lessons.

Together, they tackled Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 and the kids' favorite, *Can Can* by Offenbach. Eager to please the maestro, the children played *Venezuela*, a difficult piece.

Despite some off-notes and faltering tempos, Dudamel was encouraging throughout, pushing the Los Angeles Philharmonic's benefactors in the room to tears. One was heard saying: "He's the Obama of music," referring to the young US president-elect.

'MY BEGINNINGS'

"You remind me of my beginnings when I was playing in the orchestra in my town, a small orchestra in a small place, trying to ... be a wonderful musician," Dudamel told the inner-city children at the end of rehearsal.

Dudamel started playing violin at 10, joined *El Sistema* and by 18 was Venezuela's national youth orchestra director. In 2004, he made international headlines by winning the Gustav Mahler Conducting Prize.

Dudamel believes that playing in an youth orchestra makes better citizens of its members, because it forces them to work with up to 100 musicians and be a part of a community.

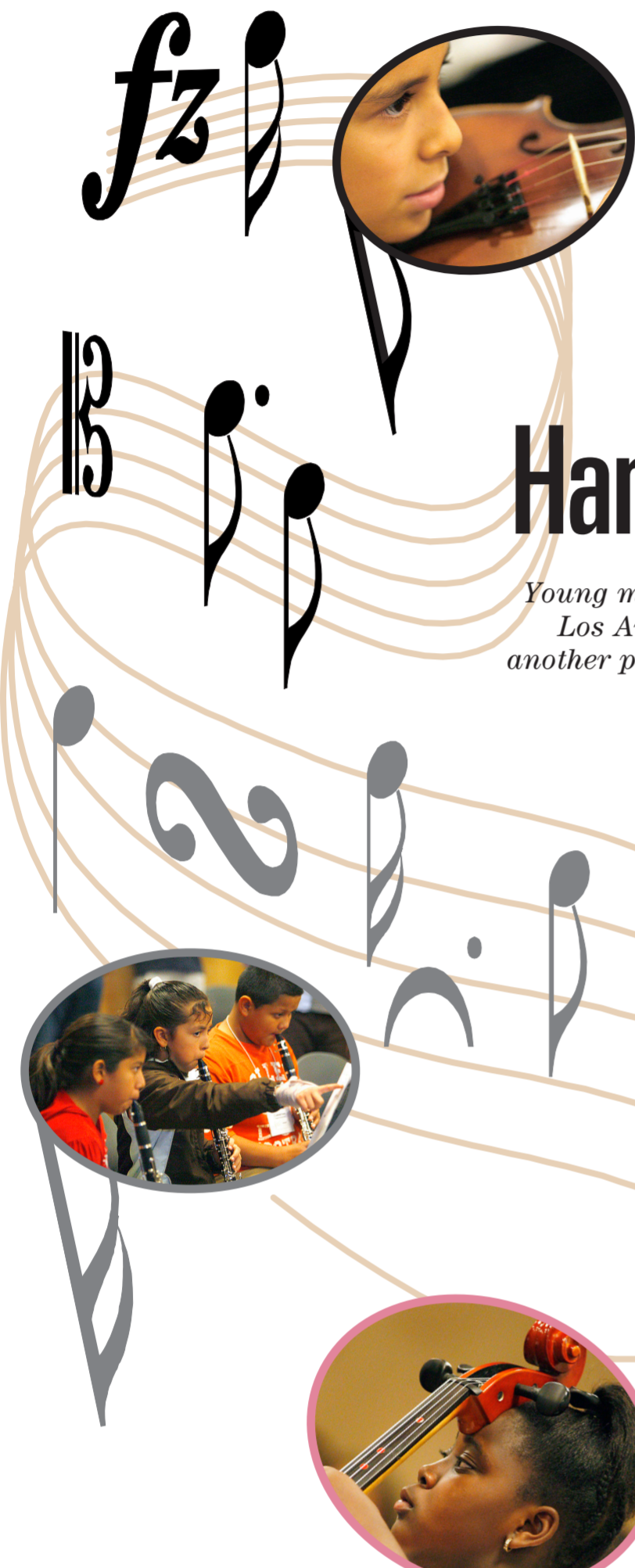
"Music is a tool of social change, like it has been in Venezuela," he said. "In music, there is no room for racial and class differences. The only thing that exists is a goal, to make music together and enjoy."

Not all the kids will become professional musicians, but Dudamel said an important by-product is building a new audience for classical music, long associated with well-heeled elites.

To make the point, he invited the kids to rehearse next time at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's modern venue, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, in downtown Los Angeles.

As it turns out, Dudamel is the same fun man with the kids as he is with the veteran musicians at Walt Disney.

Borda said a Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist watching Dudamel with the youth orchestra commented: "He rehearses it exactly as he rehearses the Los Angeles Philharmonic."



Children play as 27-year-old Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel teaches at Youth Orchestra Los Angeles. PHOTOS: REUTERS



PIANE POP

Will Smith is bringing the message of his new movie *Seven Pounds* to the Midwest with a promotional tour that has also turned into a fundraiser.

In the film, which opens across the US this Friday, Smith portrays a suicidal man determined to change the lives of several strangers.

Smith's appearance last Friday for a local premier at a theater in suburban Edina was also a

fundraiser for Minnesota's largest hunger-relief organization.

"It's cool to have the goal of being the biggest movie star in the world. But why? It's been revealed to me that the question is: Whose life is better because you woke up today?"

Smith said he realized he had drifted out of contact with everyday people on Nov. 4.

"I sat there with my children and my 16-year-old son couldn't understand how I didn't know [the US presidential election] was over already. He was like 'You're out of touch,'" he said.

Another family man, Usher, has gotten an early holiday gift — a second son.

The 29-year-old

Will Smith wants to get back in touch. PHOTO: REUTERS

singer and his wife, Tameka, are celebrating the birth of Navyid Ely Raymond. The infant arrived early Wednesday, weighing 2.64kg.

This is the second child for the couple, who were married two years ago. Tameka Raymond has three children from a previous marriage.

Not enjoying the holidays this year — or the next, for that matter — is the man who sold a newspaper footage that appeared to show Amy Winehouse taking drugs.

Johnny Blagrove and his girlfriend Cara Burton admitted offering to supply drugs, including cocaine and ecstasy, to the singer and other celebrities.

Judge Tudor Owen ordered Blagrove, 34, jailed for two years. Burton, 22, received two years' community service.

Prosecutors say the pair covertly filmed Winehouse at a party and sold the footage to *The Sun* for \$50,000 (US\$75,000).

In January the paper published the images, which appeared to

show the singer smoking crack cocaine and snorting a substance from a card.

Detectives decided there was not enough evidence to charge Winehouse because it could not be proved what the substances were.

But they charged the couple with offering to supply drugs.

Police who raided Blagrove and Burton's home found a list of celebrities they planned to film taking drugs, including Winehouse.

The judge said there was no evidence they actually sold the singer drugs — a fact that saved them from longer sentences.

In another court case, a judge has granted Tom Cruise a restraining order against an Iraq war veteran who brandished a gun near a freeway and later tried to hand-deliver a letter to the actor, an attorney said on Thursday.

Edward Van Tassel, 29, wanted to get the letter in Cruise's hands to enlist him in the cause of helping other veterans, the former soldier's attorney said.



Amy Winehouse might be celebrating this holiday season, but two of her drug dealers won't. PHOTO: AP

to being told he was clinically depressed was ... euphoria.

Finally, he said, he had an answer to why he'd been so miserable despite having the success and family he always wanted.

The 57-year-old actor, perhaps best known for playing Ralph Cifaretto on HBO's *The Sopranos*, was in Buffalo on Thursday to talk about the organization he founded two years ago to help remove the stigma attached to mental illness. It's called: No Kidding, Me Too!

"Mental disease is the only thing you can be diagnosed with and get yelled at for having," he said. "Why is that?" Appearing with representatives from pharmaceutical and biomedical research companies, Pantoliano said medication has helped him manage his depression.

"From the moment I was diagnosed there was a certain sense of euphoria and 'Thank God' we figured this out," he said, "because I thought that I'd become such a curmudgeon."

Joe Pantoliano's first reaction — AGENCIES